

POLAR BEAR RANGE STATES' MEETING

National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, U.S.A.
26-28 June 2007

Summary record of the second plenary session of the meeting

Afternoon of 26 June 2007

Chairman: Kenneth Stansell
Rapporteurs: Donna Brewer
Anne St. John

Country Presentations (continued)

Norway

The delegation from Norway relayed greetings from the Director General of the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management. The Head of the Norwegian Delegation and a representative from the Norwegian Polar Institute presented the Norwegian country report (a copy of the PowerPoint presentation will be distributed). The report contained an overview of the policy and legal framework, management responsibility, habitat protection, and import and export, with focus on the Svalbard archipelago and the Barents Sea subpopulation. He noted that, last year, Norway listed the Barents Sea subpopulation as vulnerable under the Norwegian National Red List (based on the IUCN criteria). However, the listing does not provide any legal protection but adds some scientific weight and political focus to the conservation of this subpopulation. In discussing the policy and legal framework, he noted that the Svalbard archipelago is to be among "the best managed wilderness areas in the world." He also provided an overview of the management framework for the Barents Sea area. He discussed how the ice margins around Svalbard and in the Barents Sea have changed in the last century, noting that today there is frequently no ice on the west side of Svalbard. He reported that, in collaboration with Russian colleagues, they developed a population estimate in 2004 of the shared Barents Sea subpopulation, and he stressed the need for coordinated management. With regard to polar bears killed in and around Svalbard, he noted that since the 2005 meeting of the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG), only two bears had been killed, down from a high of nearly 1,000 animals per year in the early part of the 20th century. He noted that efforts are ongoing for a stronger focus on reference areas for scientific research, including on East Svalbard. Norway is also looking at the management of tourism and traffic, in order to have this industry develop without jeopardizing the high environmental objectives set for Svalbard. It will also be important for Norway to follow up on the integrated management plan for the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea, not least with regard to oil and gas development, shipping activities, and fisheries management. He also provided information about international cooperation relevant to the polar bear.

A representative from the Norwegian Polar Institute gave a brief presentation on polar bear research in Norway, touching on the primary research areas of demography, climate, toxicology, health, behavior, and population genetics.

The Chairman opened the floor for questions.

Canada asked if the 2006 observations of minimal sea ice were atypical. Norway responded that in the last five to seven years, very atypical conditions have persisted around Svalbard. They noted that there were unusual conditions shortly after World War II, but not to the extent observed today.

The United States asked if they had found the same kinds of toxins in their studies as had been found in Canada. Norway responded that they had the same findings as Canada, with increasing levels of flame retardants and decreasing levels of PCBs.

Canada asked if, given the new designation of the species as vulnerable in Norway, they were intending to set a population goal based on that designation. Norway responded that they did not have any population estimates at all until 2004, so until the next survey is conducted (expected in 2009) and they identify a population trend, they cannot set a population goal.

Greenland asked how frequently they intended to monitor the Norwegian populations. Norway responded that the monitoring program for Svalbard includes plans for monitoring on 5-year intervals, but the actual interval will depend on budget. They also reported that the national Norwegian monitoring program for the Arctic was being administered by the Norwegian Polar Institute, and the present parameter for polar bears in that program is population size.

Russia

The Head of the Russian Delegation reported that the polar bear is included in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation and hunting has been prohibited since 1956, and therefore they have no legal basis for sport hunting in Russia. He reported that Russia strictly complies with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the 1973 *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears*. He noted that the traditional subsistence use of polar bears is an issue of principle and they want to keep working with the United States with respect to the Chukotka/Alaska shared population, in accordance with the 2000 agreement. He noted that conservation priorities include monitoring climate change and Arctic pollution. He reported on the formation of several new national parks that are expected to ensure protection of polar bears, and added that they hoped to change the status of a number of regional parks by making them national parks. He also noted that there are a number of new conservation areas under consideration. He concluded by noting that this is an overview of what they are doing and that, in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), they are developing a plan to protect polar bears in Russia and they welcome the involvement of Norway, Greenland and other nations in this effort.

A member of the Russian Delegation then presented the country report (a copy of the PowerPoint presentations will be distributed). He provided an overview of national legal measures for protecting polar bears, status of the three main Russian polar bear populations, conservation threats, and bilateral and multilateral cooperation to conserve polar bears. He noted that current polar bear conservation efforts in Russia are guided by the 1973 Agreement. He noted that research priorities are focusing on the complexities in population structure and changes in ice cover and the effect on polar bear reproduction and food resource availability. He noted that climate change creates favorable conditions for increased marine traffic in the northern marine passages, which carry the increased risk of accidental oil spills. He summarized bilateral collaboration with Norway and the United States and highlighted anticipated future research and conservation efforts. He noted that the Russian side was satisfied to hear how Canada and Greenland are dealing with subsistence hunting and reported that Russia intends to reinstate the right of indigenous people of Chukotka to harvest polar bears of the Chukotka/Alaska population for traditional subsistence purposes, and he gave an overview of the conditions under which such hunting would occur. He concluded by noting that Russia is currently developing a program of monitoring the status of the Chukotka/Alaska population with the participation of indigenous people of Chukotka.

The Chairman opened the floor for questions.

Norway noted that they hoped to undertake a joint population estimate with Russia in 2009 or 2010. They also asked if Russia considered the Kara Sea and the Barents Sea subpopulations as the same population. Russia responded that they were shown as being combined, consistent with the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation.

Norway inquired about an April 2007 report in the International Herald Tribune regarding legalized polar bear hunting in Russia and the possible benefit to conservation. Russia responded that this was a difficult question but that there had been a ban for the past 50 years on polar bear hunting. They noted that estimates of illegal take differ, with around 100-200 bears illegally taken annually in the 1990s. However, they added that recent illegal take had declined. They concluded that, if there were a legal native take, the native peoples would be more actively involved in polar bear management and would be more likely to provide data on actual take.

The United States requested clarification on the status of the Chukotka/Alaska shared population. Russia responded that the 2000 population estimate was an estimate by the PBSG and was based on surveys of birthing dens and did not employ the most advanced methods. They reported that they had determined with U.S. colleagues that the population was either stable or declining. They noted that the Barents Sea estimates were based on data from Norwegian experts, but they said that more research was needed because the population structure appeared to be more complex than previously thought.

The United States asked if Russia anticipated implementing any restrictions on marine traffic as commercial activity in Russian waters that are included in polar bear habitat increased. Russia responded that they had not taken any measures to date because there had not been significant increase in marine traffic in the northern seas. They noted that they did not have the data to

determine definitively if marine traffic is affecting polar bears, however, they will need to revisit the issue if and when marine traffic intensifies.

Canada indicated that it had two questions that it would no longer pose as they had been answered.

Before moving on to the final country report, the Chairman asked the delegations if there was any objection to the PowerPoint presentations serving as the country reports. He also noted that the Russian PowerPoint presentation would be translated into English. There was no objection to the Chairman's suggestion.

United States

The Head of the U.S. Delegation introduced the U.S. delegation and presented the U.S. country report (a copy of the PowerPoint presentation will be distributed). The report contained an overview of laws and agreements related to polar bear management, partnerships in polar bear conservation, and the proposed rule to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). He added that the Fish and Wildlife Service had received over 600,000 comments during the 90-day comment period on the proposed rule. The representative from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) reviewed the biology of the species and outlined the scientific research being used to inform the decision-making process under the proposed rule. She noted that researchers were recently receiving much more information from remote-sensing on changes to sea ice, and that they had determined that multi-age ice was very important to polar bears. She also noted that approximately 8% of the summer sea ice is being lost per decade in some areas and 3% of winter ice is being lost. She reported that there are documented quantitative declines in the population of the Western Hudson Bay. She noted that current contaminant loads in polar bears are low and not thought to be causing population impacts. Future U.S. studies on polar bears will focus on population projection models, and characterization of the uncertainty in sea ice variability. She ended by reporting that USGS is going to convene an experts' workshop to address modeling uncertainty and knowledge gaps in polar bear status in relation to sea ice.

The Chairman opened the floor for questions.

Norway asked to hear more about the possible ESA listing, specifically what groups had provided comments and the nature of those comments. The United States responded that the Fish and Wildlife Service had held three public meetings (two in Alaska and one in Washington, D.C.) and had a 90-day comment period on the proposed rule. They reported that most of the over 600,000 public comments were duplicative and contained emotional pleas – only about 200 of the comments provided substantive information. They noted that the final decision would be made based on the ESA listing criteria but would not be made before January 2008.

Canada asked if the species were listed as threatened, what impact that would have on the exemptions for subsistence harvest under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The United States responded that they believed that subsistence harvest could continue even if the species were listed.

Canada asked how the proposed amendments to the MMPA, currently being discussed in the U.S. Congress, would affect the Canadian polar bear subpopulations that are subject to sport hunting since those quotas are part of the subsistence take. The United States noted that if the amendments were adopted, the Fish and Wildlife Service would have to abide by the new restrictions. However, they noted that the U.S. administration position opposed the amendments and the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service signed a letter to that effect today. They supported Canada's comments that there was no additional mortality associated with polar bear sport hunting in Canada.

Canada asked if the polar bear is listed as threatened, what would be the possible recovery goals that could address ice-habitat and its change, and would these goals be legally binding. The United States responded that the ESA requires the agency to develop a recovery plan for listed species that includes measures that are reasonable and implementable. They noted that, in the face of habitat loss due to melting sea ice and global climate change, they were not sure what a recovery plan would look like. They added that a recovery plan does not have the weight of law and is only advisory.

Russia asked what legal restrictions would be put in place if the species were listed. The United States reiterated that they did not know what kind of legal restrictions would be enacted but that considerations might include activity in shipping lanes and near denning sites.

With no additional questions, the Chairman concluded the discussion. He noted that the day's presentations provided a good context for the discussions over the next two days. He asked the delegations to think about the remaining agenda items and what recommendations they could make for next steps. He asked that each delegation give a brief intervention to begin the remaining discussions, with the United States speaking to import and export, Canada speaking to sport hunting, Greenland addressing subsistence harvest, Norway addressing bear/human interactions, and Russia addressing research and monitoring priorities. Finally, he noted that there would be no communiqué for the meeting and stressed the importance of developing recommendations for next steps.

At this point, the Chairman closed the session.